

The Weaver Bride

By LYDIA GREGOVIC

Chapter One

It was his watch fob that drew me to him initially. There were plenty of good-looking men in Balmoore, even more clustered around our nation's capital, the sea-battered Isle d'Eylau. But I made my living off picking out the rich.

The chain was discreet: thin, with links of a delicate rosy gold, the watch-bearing end disappearing into his waistcoat pocket. It wasn't the only such accessory in the teatime crowd that packed the gilded lobby of the Diplomat, the cosmopolitan seaside hotel in which I currently found myself seated; it wasn't even the only one at the bar. From where I sat, sipping from my porcelain coffee cup while the afternoon rain beat a litany outside, I could spot two more fobs of similar function. One, silver and as thick as my index finger, glinting on the torso of a bow-tied man who was staring at the woman a few barstools down with hungry eyes; the other, slipping between the fingers of the younger gentleman she was conversing with. Both accessories, I could tell, were expensive. And yet, my gaze lingered on each of them for only a moment before drifting back to their less ostentatious sibling—the first chain I had noticed. Its owner, too, was hunched over the bar, the brim of his bowler hat pulled low over his eyes despite the interior setting, so that the majority of his features were lost to shadow. He was dressed for the day in a slim-cut morning coat and trousers, both in a slippery ebony shade, and the loose way he was sitting—slouched as if his muscles were nothing but liquid—told me that he was likely young, too. Judging by the fact that nearly every lady who passed him by would inexplicably pause as they crossed the lobby, hovering for a half second near him as if their hems had become stuck on an invisible nail, I also assumed he was handsome.

None of this—his implied attractiveness, the fact that he was clad in the latest fashions—was unordinary, necessarily. The Diplomat was the kind of place where posh and moneyed people gathered, in a city overrun with the posh and moneyed; even at this relatively early hour, the occupants of its lobby were there to see and be seen. No, what caught my attention about this particular guest was that when the other men shifted in their seats, their watch fobs glittered dully, reflecting the wan stormlight that spilled like pale ale across the entire grand room. But when the owner of the rosy gold watch fob moved, his chain . . . It *burned*.

It was Woven—there was no other explanation for the way the metal links screamed with a starfire glow when the light hit them, as if beneath their polished surface lay a molten white core. Though I couldn't make out the source of the blaze, I was almost positive that, were I to crack open the watch's fat belly, I would find a single luminescent strand of magesilk encased like a

fossil within.

In truth, the moniker was slightly misleading. Contrary to what I'd assumed back when I'd first learned of them, Woven items were not named for their material—they could be made of metal or cloth or anything in between—but rather the magesilk which powered them, spun from the hair of one of Balmoore's revered silkwitches and containing a fraction of the magic that overflowed in the bodies of girls like me. Had I not been careful to wash my own tresses in my standard, noxious mixture of boiled walnut bark, fig leaves, and wine earlier that very morning, my waves would have shone in the same manner—though considerably less brightly—a beacon signaling the sister goddesses', the Envies', blessing.

Most likely, the strand of magesilk within this fob had enchanted it so that the hands of the minuscule watch it carried never ticked too loud, or turned out of time, or went still. To be candid, I didn't care so much about the details of the thing.

I cared about the man who wore it.

As every citizen of Balmoore knew, there were only a couple of ways one could come by a Woven object. If a person had the means, they could purchase or even commission such an item—but, though as a source of magic, magesilk was incredibly potent, requiring only a single strand to power an enchantment for life, crafting it was a labor- and resource-intensive process. Few had the ability to produce it; fewer still, to afford it.

More likely, the possessor of such an object was a Weaver themselves—a descendant of one of the male sorcerer lines whose roots stretched back further than the founding of our nation, and whose family artisans worked their spinning wheels day and night, turning silkwitches' shed hair into bespoke trinkets like enchanted watch chains. If that were case, the knickknack I was eyeing was unlikely to be the only such treasure in my target's collection; somewhere on his person he would be carrying a seal, a magical relic typically shaped into a ring and formed with the first hair given by whichever silkwitch he'd bonded in marriage. But I'd been watching the young fob owner carefully since he sat down, and I had yet to see the flash of the usual ostentatious band around his finger. Neither did his suit bear the trademark spinning wheel insignia, which all Weavers wore proudly to distinguish themselves.

Which left only the other option: If this boy was not wed to a silkwitch—not a Weaver himself—it must mean he was another, equally elusive and rare, creature.

An incredibly single, incredibly rich man.

The perfect quarry.

I glanced at the clock hanging over the bar. It was currently a quarter to four, which meant I had precisely fifteen minutes before I needed to ascend the Diplomat's floors to room twenty-three, where Mrs. Catherine Pierce's valet—a stern-faced man named Guillaume—was awaiting me. Not much time, but if I was efficient, plenty to do the work that I needed.

Pushing my coffee cup aside, I slipped the loop of my embroidered reticule around my wrist and rose from my chair. I'd almost reached the stool next to the one where the watch-fob owner was seated when he stood, turning in a rush of motion and crashing directly into me.

"Goddesses—I am so sorry, miss."

A pair of hands on my waist, steadying me as I wheeled forward, then pulling abruptly away again. I raised my eyes from the floor, where they'd jumped in fearful anticipation of my descent, to encounter a solid-looking chest in a starched shift, then lifted them higher still, passing over a stand collar with turned-down wing tips and a cinched, sapphire-blue silk ascot until, finally, I reached his face.

My target's bowler hat had tipped back in our collision, fully exposing the man beneath it. Or boy, rather—up close, he appeared younger than I had previously guessed, hovering somewhere on the cusp between adolescence and adulthood, right around my own eighteen. What he seemingly lacked in years, though, he made up for in height. I was not especially short myself, but his frame was such that I had to tilt my chin upward to take him in fully, a dynamic I instantly disliked as it made me feel vulnerable, like some doe blinking rapidly at her hunter. His skin was a light taupe hue, what the fashion plates would call *fawn*, and lustrous, with a shining pink under-glow that spoke of health and hardiness, of long walks across windblown moors and of never tiring. Beneath his bowler, his tawny locks were caught somewhere between a curl and a wave, slightly crushed from the hat's weight. He was gazing at me with a worried expression; his eyes were curious, hazel-green streaked through with gold like leaves just beginning to decay.

He was inarguably, undoubtedly, *obviously* beautiful, and I was surprised when, upon taking him in, I felt a flush stirring in my cheeks—a whisper of heat. Rapidly, I revised my earlier assessments. I was not unconfident in my own looks, but that in itself would not be enough—from previous encounters, I'd learned that in cases like this, it was always best to have a clear physical advantage. A lure was more tempting if the target of one's hunt felt they had to reach up to grasp it, after all. No man wanted what swam on his level.

A furrow appeared between the boy's brows, and I realized, with a jolt of horror, that he was waiting for me to respond to him. What had he said? I hurriedly raked back through my memory: *Sorry*. He'd apologized for running into me. *Sisters three*. I wished I could look away from him—his beauty was irritating, disorienting, like the glare of the high summer sun.

Gathering myself, I curved my lips into a soft smile, stepping back to put more space between us. "Not at all, sir. The fault was mine." I demurred, darting my gaze past him to the bar, where the concerned barman was watching us with a frown. The filigreed clock above him now read only eight minutes until four; I needed to move, and soon. Guillaume did not tolerate tardiness—not to mention my plan, which had felt so solid at my little café table, now seemed as rickety as an old wooden bridge. Inhaling, I directed my attention back toward the boy, debating my path forward . . .

. . . And froze as, while I watched, he moved to tug idly at his ascot, jostling the puff of fabric and revealing the spoked symbol stitched into the white of his collar beneath it—now abruptly exposed like a spider beneath a stone.

A golden spinning wheel.

Fear shivered through me. In all of Balmoore, there was only a single class of men who claimed that sigil as their own. Only one group whose efforts filled those gilded bobbins.

I felt myself tilt, as though on an axis. The boy in front of me was a Weaver—a *sorcerer* of the exact category which I had spent the past twelve months avoiding. And if one of his kind caught wind of my plot, I could guess the punishment I would face.

The cloisters. I shuddered at the thought of the fortress-like institutions where all silkwitches were banished if they did not succeed in finding a husband by their twenty-first birthday. From the east side of the Isle, it was possible to see them: blocky stone structures built into Balmoore's cliffs, peering out like a row of grim faces from the coastline. The details of what occurred behind those murky windows were for the most part unknown, which made fertile ground for rumors. The generalities, however, remained consistent no matter the tale: Rows of spinning wheels lined up like soldiers in the dusky gloom, manned by girls only a few years older than I, their hands bloody and pricked from hours spent feeding sheaves of their own shed hair onto the bobbin. Considering it took a hank of silkwitch hair to form a single length of magesilk, spinning was time-intensive work—not that the women who undertook it had much of a choice in the matter. For girls with my particular gift, fate was a narrow and unwinding road; either we wed and enter the supervision of our Weaver husbands until the inevitable fading of our magic, or the cloisters would look after us instead.

It should have been, at least, a temporary arrangement. Unlike Weaver magic, which matured along with its possessor and lasted until the day of their death, a silkwitch's blessing was a short-lived spark, typically manifesting around puberty and burning out a decade or so later in a girl's midtwenties, when womanhood had swept away the cold ashes of her youth. In a depressing, resigned sort of way, one might assume the departure of their gift would come as a relief to the silkwitches kept in the cloisters—once the last of their blessing had been spent and their hair could no longer produce magesilk, their sequestration should have been over.

And yet . . . along with the nature of their work, there was one other consistency amongst all the stories about cloister girls—one fact which, over and over again, had been proven true. Once a silkwitch entered those shadowed doors, they never came back out.

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